



How Firm a Foundation: Faith and Practice in the Works of William Inge

by Philip Middleton Williams, Ph.D.

Presented at the William Inge Theatre Festival.

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One of the bedrocks of life in a small town in America is going to church. As an observer and chronicler of small town life, William Inge uses faith and practice as a subtext in his plays and novels. Although there is very little outward acknowledgement of expressed faith, it weaves its way into the characters and stories as a subtle presence. Through his writings, Inge expresses an almost wistful view of religion, as if he is an outsider with his nose pressed against the stained glass, wishing he could believe fully in the power of God as a guiding force in his life so that it might relieve him of his perceived failings, and a sense of envy in the apparent fulfillment found by those who do believe in making their life complete.

If you Google “churches in Independence, Kansas,” you will get about thirty-seven hits. That’s an impressive number for a town with a population of just over nine thousand souls; it works out to about one church for every 256 people. The churches run the gamut from mainline Catholic and Protestant to evangelical non-denominational, and there’s even a Quaker meeting. (If you’re looking for a synagogue, though, you have to go to Tulsa.) It’s not hard to imagine that there were probably just as many places of worship in Independence when William Inge was growing up, and according to the 1920 census, which was taken when he was seven years old, the population was over eleven thousand, so chances are there were probably a few more.

In many respects, that is not a remarkable fact. Small towns in America, whether they are in New England or New Mexico, have always had faith communities at their heart. Whether it is the iconic white steeple at the center of town in Vermont, the adobe mission in Taos, or the red brick Georgian on the corner here in Independence, we have made it the foundation of our culture to the point that membership is not required to be a

part of the congregation. It provides a gathering place in times of joy or sorrow, celebration or commiseration, a shelter in the time of storms, and a refuge for the faithful when the outside world becomes overwhelming or a threat. And while the church itself may be open only on Sunday (or Wednesday night for bingo), it makes its presence felt in every corner of the town, even in places where religion or a profession of faith may not have been welcome.

It is impossible to imagine a more pervasive or defining force in our civilization. Everything we do, think, or learn, is instilled by the nebulous belief in a supreme being and the practice of worship, even if there is no formal schooling or professed acceptance of faith. It defines us as clearly as our race, our gender, our social standing or ethnicity. We are born into it and have it woven into the fabric of our lives and identity that it becomes practically inseparable. And yet... the sense of belonging and participating can be a distancing factor as well if, for some reason, either by instinct or learned behavior, we find that we are apart from this force, somehow at odds with the tenets and teachings, and subliminally ostracized from the rest of the flock. Somehow, something keeps us from fully accepting – and being fully accepted by – the practice of worship as a part of our lives. And it is not at all hard to imagine what it must have been like to grow up in a place like Independence in the 1920's where worship was as natural as breathing and yet still feel estranged from it by some inner awareness that you did not find comfort or even felt hostility or bigotry emanating from this institution dedicated to unconditional love and peace... for those who believe.

That must have been what William Inge felt as he grew up here, surrounded on all sides by the faithful. Something deep inside him must have told him he was not

unconditionally welcome, or he could not accept it if he was. In his autobiographical novel, *My Son is a Splendid Driver*, published in 1971, the Hansen family's church affiliation is tangential – the denomination is not mentioned – and religion is given either lip service or used as a cudgel of bigotry against those who are Not Our Kind: for example, the Holt family across the street with their Catholicism, or the Jewish couple that owns the clothing store downtown. Oh, they're nice enough people until they do something awful like marry one of your kids.

In the evangelical tradition that is pervasive in many of the faiths in the Midwest, a fundamental tenet is that the believer must develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Statements of faith begin with the declaration of the moment when the believer accepts Christ as their personal savior on a one-to-one basis in the same way someone might declare their relationship with a spouse. This foundation of faith takes on an intimate characteristic: you become one with Christ and therefore you define your relationship with God in those terms.

For William Inge, it seemed to be a strained relationship. If the narrative in *My Son* was his own life story, God was, to use one of his own phrases, “an ornery bastard.” God exacts a price for living a life of leisure and lust; he takes away precious children with the stroke of a razor blade, and he visits gloom upon an aging relative by prolonging her life to the point that she is begging to die. This is not the kind and loving God of the New Testament, but rather the vengeful and exacting God of the Old, who controls each life and promises destruction for those who are not suitably obedient. And yet this is also the God that delivers the peace and tranquility of the promise of everlasting life in the rainbow at the end of the Flood, and later on, in the name of his son Jesus Christ, whom

God himself tested and punished while on Earth. It is the paradox of faith that you must be both afraid of the wrath of God yet also forgiven for all your sins in the name of his son. This contrast of hope and resurrection with fear and anguish was the undercurrent of faith in the eyes of a small-town boy who knew, deep in his heart and never spoken out loud, that he could never be acceptable in the eyes of the Lord as seen through the eyes of the faithful that surrounded him.

His mother sees God as a harsh and judgmental figure, cursing her personally with a faithless husband who infects her with a venereal disease, and punishes her for her lack of faith by burdening her and her family with hateful relatives and, worst of all, taking her beloved eldest son for no other reason other than what seems to be pure spite. If she had a distant relationship with God before, this cemented her estrangement from him, and she viewed others who went to church as hypocrites and show-offs. In a passage from *My Son is a Splendid Driver*, Mrs. Hansen lays out her feelings neatly in observing her neighbor:

“Every morning on the front porch we would see Mrs. Holt leave her house and start for the Catholic church, on her way to mass.

‘She doesn’t miss a day,’ Mother observed. There was a dedication about the woman that always gave us pause. ‘I wish *I* had a God to pray to now,’ Mother sometimes said, ‘but I don’t seem able to find Him.’

Mother had stopped going to church. ‘Church isn’t the place to go with your troubles. Church is just a place to go when you’re feeling good and have a new hat to wear.’ There was a little bitterness in what she said, a little self-pity, but there was also truth. Our minister would have been the last person in the world she could have talked to, to have lifted the curse she felt upon her and save her from feeling damned. She would have embarrassed the man into speechlessness had she gone to him with her

story. He would have been unable to look at her or my father without coloring.

Most of our morality, I was beginning to think, was based on a refusal to recognize sin. Our entire religious heritage, it seemed to me, was one of refusal to deal with it.”⁽¹⁾

When her son dies suddenly from blood poisoning, leaving a young wife pregnant with their son, Mrs. Hansen is inconsolable and finds no comfort in faith or in the inconsequential platitudes of “it is God’s will.” She cries out,

““Oh, my son! God give him back! He wasn’t meant to die!’

But God was stern, and unrelenting. He doesn’t end our griefs, Mother had to learn; He can only help us to endure them.”⁽²⁾

Of course Inge could not shake his fist at God in his plays and expect to see them performed. Instead, they are layered with the sense of presence of religion as the foundation of everyday life. Few of the characters are depicted as particularly imbued with religious fervor, and with the exception of Sammy in *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, no one’s specific denomination is mentioned. Even then, because he is Jewish, he is seen as an outsider (and comes to an unhappy end.) But faith and practice is always present, and most of the characters in the plays and novels are, if not practicing members of a community, aware and respectful of it, if not terrified. In *Picnic*, Hal is welcomed into the community and told when the local bible study meets, taking it as a matter of faith that he is both a Christian and a Baptist.

In a more sobering aspect, so to speak, Doc in *Come Back, Little Sheba* is a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, a group that is based in the belief in a Higher Power

– God as we understand him – and that it is a part of the journey of recovery by relying in part on the spiritual power. It is not a religious practice; there is no service or ritual other than the meeting and sharing and spoken prayer, and it is open to all faiths or those who have none. But its members strive to turning over the problems and sorrows that led to the alcoholics’ behavior to God and thereby free themselves to work toward healing. “Let Go and Let God” is one of the more common aphorisms in the AA lexicon. And since Inge acknowledged his alcoholism by joining AA in 1948, it seems as if he found that if he could not find God in the pews of the churches of Independence, nor in the bottom of a Scotch bottle, at least the awareness of a spiritual presence gave him comfort and shelter that eluded him for his entire life. And when he saw the effect it had on the people he cared about, he marveled at it. He summed it up in a passage in *My Son* where Joey meets up with Betsy, an old friend from college while in a bookstore in Kansas City. They had become friends because they were both outcasts; Inge because of his shyness and repressed feelings, and Betsy because she was, in the words of the time, “a wanton woman,” who had flaunted the rigid mores and racial barriers of the time. When they meet years later, it is a heartfelt reunion, including her telling him of thrill of seeing *A Streetcar Named Desire* on Broadway. She tells Joey that she would have made a wonderful Blanche.

“After a moment, she said, ‘You know something, Joey? We never learn what life is all about until we fail.’

I asked her to explain.

‘Well, it’s as though I had wanted all the time to become an actress just to have my own way about something, and I really don’t know what the something was. But I was ambitious in the wrong way. It’s almost as though I wanted to be a brilliant success in the theater in order to have

vengeance on someone... I don't know who. Maybe the world. So I missed. I know I had talent, but I was using it in the wrong way. It was I who messed up my chances. I alone. I had to give up my conception of what my life was going to be, do you see? My *will* had to be overcome. I had to learn that there's a stronger will that works behind the entire universe that sometimes stops us in our headstrong way and says No. And then you have to surrender to a real life, Joey. The life that's really yours.... Understand what I mean? Or am I being too metaphysical, or something?'

'I think I understand something of what you mean, Betsy. I think I do.' After lunch, we parted. All the rest of the day, I thought of Betsy, feeling somehow I had witnessed one of Christ's miracles.'⁽³⁾

If William Inge could not find comfort or acceptance in faith in God and his church, then at least he does see that faith is not something that is inherently religious. Faith is the belief in things unseen, intangible. You can't put your hands on it; you can't take it apart to see what makes it work. And yet, we all have faith in something. It doesn't have to be in God. It can be faith in knowing that we have friends we can count on, a family who cares for us, or faith in our own abilities to make the right choices because we learned that we human beings rely on others and ourselves to be good and moral people with no need to prove it every time. It may be called "trust" or "love" or nothing more than just the basic human instinct that we all carry within us to take care of our fellow man and mankind. But to some degree we all have it, and even when we see horrible things happen – war, destruction, bigotry, and hatred – we are able to say that we have faith in knowing that that is not truly who we are.

But we speak of faith in the present tense. It is in the here and now: you have faith in God, or your friends or the other qualities, but when we look to the future, it isn't so much faith that we rely on; it is hope. And hope is an even more powerful force than faith. You can rely on your faith, but you put your hope in the future. It is even more nebulous than faith, for in some cases, faith can be proven or disproven. A child may have had faith in Santa Claus, for instance, but at some point he will know that Santa is really a marketing gimmick exploited by F.A.O. Schwarz and your dad is the one who ate the cookies left by the fireplace. But that child never lost hope that he would get presents under the tree, whether they were brought by a jolly old elf and eight tiny reindeer or the guy in the UPS truck. Or we may have hope in the long term; that we will live a good and happy life and that no matter what comes along in the next year or four years or ten or so; no matter what demons and perils and tragedies and losses and battles we face, we have hope we will make it through, putting our faith in that hope. It is, as Emily Dickinson said, "the thing with feathers that perches in the Soul – and sings the tune without the Words – and never stops – at all."

There is a kind of guarded optimism and hope in Inge's plays, even if it is but a faint glimmer. After all, God is still that ornery bastard. But we see Madge run off to Tulsa chasing a man we know will never amount to anything, hoping that she can change him and find happiness. In *Bus Stop* we see Bo and Cherie get on the bus and head for the West with little more than hope. In both cases, though, we see them leaving behind wistful and lonely friends and family. In *Come Back, Little Sheba*, Doc and Lola are barely able to speak to each other until Lola finally admits that Sheba is never going to come back, but life must go on. So many of Inge's stories end with apparent sadness, yet

each does seem to offer just a tad of hope because the people in them have their faith shaken but not lost, their hope dented but not destroyed, and a solemn acceptance that while the future may not be all roses and rainbows, at least there is something to live for.

After he parted from his meeting with Betsy, Joey muses,

“And yet, though she had asked me to come out to visit her and her husband, I know it was unlikely that I would. I could not help feeling apart from them, for they had already become a fixed part of what outsiders call with some derision, some envy, the *normal* world, the world of people who come home at night to ordinary meals, enjoy ordinary companionship, and suffer ordinary appetites and desires, a world I often curse, like Lucifer the heaven from which he had been expelled, knowing I am *not* Lucifer and that it is a false heaven I long at times to return to, wishing to God I could still find comfort in its solidarity and mirage of warmth, feeling at times I would be willing to hate Negroes, or condemn Jews, and pretend to worship God while I worshipped Mammon, if I could feel once again the assurance of belonging to the great mass of people who live their lives without conscience or reflection, and subscribe to mass opinion as my father subscribed to *Time* magazine, never challenging its precepts.

But once the mold is cast, the form cannot be changed. The shape of me could no longer fit into other people's houses. I cannot claim that Betsy and her husband are hypocrites because they are happy. But sometimes, in spells of bitterness and isolation, happiness in itself has seemed an hypocrisy. And if I hated their happiness, it was because I felt a stranger to it, and a stranger to their welcome. It was a happiness that made me feel more alone.”⁽⁴⁾

Within two years of publishing those words, William Inge let the feelings of being the stranger win out. He tried to find solace in reaching out to the Catholic church, but it

was not enough, and on a quiet evening in June of 1973, he went into the garage in his home in Hollywood and sat behind the wheel of his car for the last time. While he may have given his plays and his characters some sense of hope, he could never reconcile his own distance from his faith-filled hometown and friends. In the words of a character in a play by another author, hope was his greatest weakness.

Notes

1. William Inge, My Son is a Splendid Driver (Boston: Little, Brown and Company. 1971) p. 152-153.
2. Inge, p. 110.
3. Inge, p. 214.
4. Inge, p. 214-215.

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